

“Cutting through”: overcoming the barriers to academic engagement with policy processes

*A lack of access and poor communication are often cited as reasons why academic research is not widely used by policymakers. But what about the challenges for researchers engaging with decision-makers such as parliaments? **Lindsay Walker, Lindsey Pike, Marsha Wood and Hannah Durrant** have surveyed more than 400 research professionals and identified some clear barriers, with heavy workloads and a lack of transparency around how research will be used among the most prominent. In order to promote better engagement between academia and policy such initiatives should provide guidance for academics on the different opportunities to submit research evidence, be transparent about why and how that evidence will be used, and provide clear acknowledgement of the research contribution by academic sources.*

Access to reliable and timely evidence is essential for parliaments to effectively execute their four [main functions](#): scrutiny, legislation, debating, and financial oversight. Sources of evidence can be diverse, with academic research [only one type of information](#) used in parliamentary processes.

A [substantial recent study](#), led by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology ([POST](#)), examined the role of academic research in the UK Parliament. Findings revealed that, while research in its broadest sense is useful for parliamentary work, challenges remain, with academic research still “[not cutting through](#)”. General surveys and follow-up interviews – including with MPs, MPs’ staff, parliamentary staff, and peers – identified a [lack of accessibility and poor communication](#) as challenges to the use of academic research. For example, evidence in academic sources was commonly thought to be presented in a complicated way, with one MP commenting: “[Academic research is usually not that user-friendly from our point of view as users](#)”. An earlier study of UK parliamentary staff also found that academic research was seen to be “[too abstruse](#).”

But what about the challenges for researchers engaging with decision-makers such as parliaments? Engaging with a select committee is one of the key mechanisms for researchers to present evidence to Parliament. However, the higher education sector (e.g. universities, research groups) is [usually underrepresented](#) in written and oral submissions. One 2013-14 study revealed that just [8.1% of oral evidence](#) presented to select committees was from the higher education sector.

Select committees are just one part of Parliament to use evidence; the libraries (e.g. the [House of Commons Library](#)) and POST also use and gather information. These different parliamentary arenas use evidence in diverging ways, thereby requiring academics to [package their research in different ways](#). Three strategies to enhance engagement as identified by the [study](#) of UK parliamentary staff are to:

- translate findings more effectively; e.g. creating narrative case studies
- develop relationships with policymakers
- design and conduct research in collaboration with parliamentary actors.

Employing such strategies can militate against the current view held by parliamentary staff that academic research is “[too abstract from the real world](#)” and “[unaware of how Parliament works and what it requires](#)”.

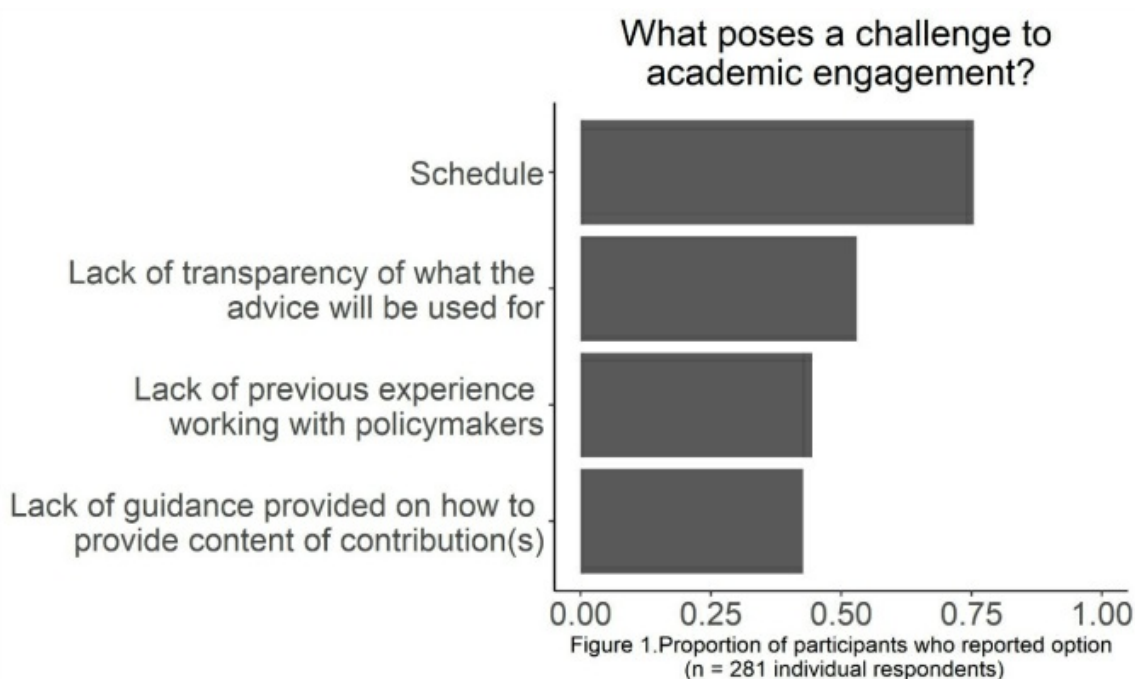
So, it is clear there are challenges around academic engagement with Parliament. What is less clear is why. What are the barriers to engaging with parliamentary processes? What would motivate academics to engage more with Parliament? Recently, we launched a nationwide survey to improve our understanding of the policy experience of UK-based researchers. This was part of a project to determine the utility and feasibility of establishing the [UK Evidence Information Service](#) (EIS), an innovative model that aims to facilitate research engagement with decision-makers. The EIS would act as a rapid matchmaker to connect research-users (including the parliamentary arenas that use evidence) with the UK academic community in the service of evidence-informed public policy. The EIS project was initially funded by the [GW4 Building Communities programme](#) and is now supported by a [European Research Council](#) grant. Partners in the GW4-funded phase included [Cardiff University](#), [University of Exeter](#), [PolicyBristol](#), [University of Bath Institute for Policy Research \(IPR\)](#), [UCL](#), and the [House of Commons Library](#).

Although the survey questions were asked in the context of a proposed EIS system, the findings have a wider application to academic policy engagement. The survey was designed by the GW4 academic team with input from the [House of Commons Library](#) and the [National Assembly for Wales Research Service](#).

Barriers and motivators for academic engagement with policy

Over 400 research professionals participated in our survey. Findings provide clear guidance on how to improve wider policy engagement with academics.

For those researchers who have previously engaged with the policy sphere, interest in policy was a common motivator to provide evidence for policymaking. Despite this motivation, considerable barriers to engaging with processes relating to policymaking were identified; workload of the individual researcher being the most prominent reported barrier. Other barriers identified were lack of transparency about what the research findings would be used for; lack of previous experience working with policymakers; and lack of guidance on content of contributions (see Figure 1).



Corresponding with this, academics also identified the following key aspects to encouraging engagement with processes relating to policymaking: understanding what the evidence will be used for; receiving guidance on style and content of contribution; and acknowledgement of the academic contribution by the policymaker or elected official (see Figure 2). Women were significantly more likely than men to select options relating to guidance.

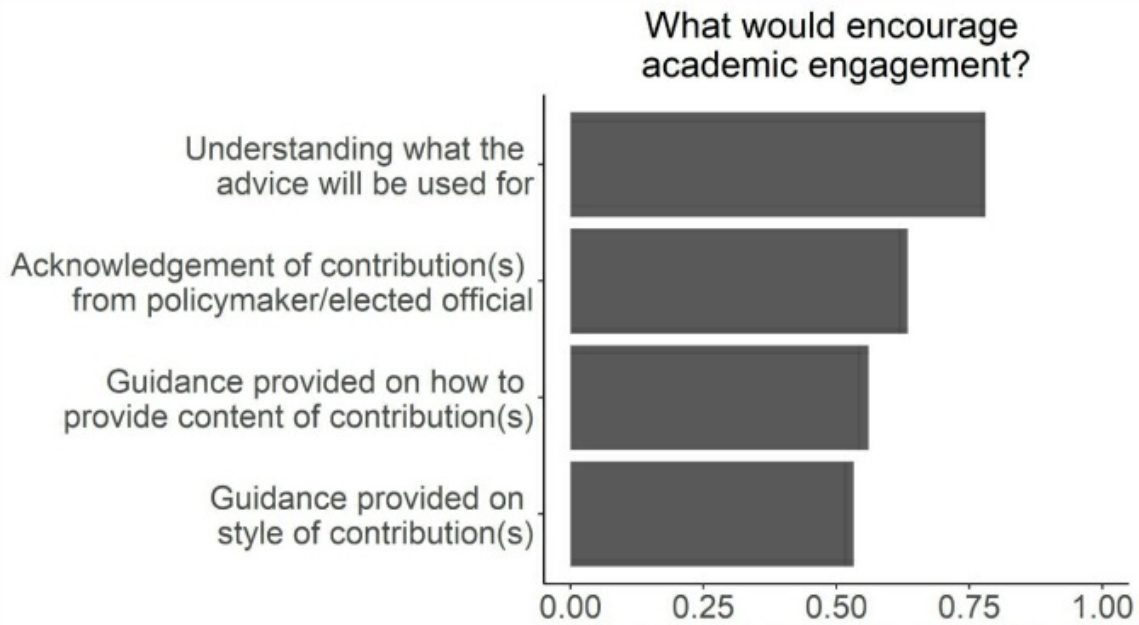


Figure 2. Proportion of participants who reported option (n = 287 individual respondents)

Future for policy-academic engagement initiatives

These results suggest that any policy-academic engagement initiative needs to:

- provide guidance for academics tailored to the different opportunities to submit research evidence
- be transparent about why and how the submitted research evidence will subsequently be used
- provide clear acknowledgement of the research contribution by academic sources.

The workload of academics still poses a challenge to policy-academic engagement. The recent financial incentive for universities to collect evidence of research impact for submission to the [Research Excellent Framework](#) (REF) may facilitate discussions around ensuring researchers have protected time for engagement with decision-makers. For REF2014, [20% of impact case studies](#) outlined engagement with the UK Parliament; if universities want to increase this type of engagement, the major barrier of academic workload must be addressed. For example, funding bodies and universities may consider providing dedicated funds for researchers to provide academic-policy contributions, which are currently lacking.

These survey findings will be used in conjunction with our [previous consultation](#) with UK MPs, as well as ongoing discussions with parliamentary staff, to shape the proposed EIS into a working system that benefits all relevant stakeholders. By tailoring the service to overcome some of the barriers to engagement, the EIS can facilitate efficient communication between research-users and research-providers, thus widening the knowledge base of researchers engaging with decision-makers.

Policy-academic engagement is a two-way process with benefits to both sides. By taking into account our findings regarding challenges and benefits for academics to engage, the EIS could enhance the integration of research evidence with policy and practice across the UK.

The EIS team have worked with the [House of Commons Library](#) and the [National Assembly for Wales Research Service](#) over the last year to trial aspects of the proposed system, and the feedback from this will be assessed in the coming months. Do you have ideas to improve academic-policy engagement, or thoughts on the EIS? We welcome your feedback – please leave a comment below or contact Dr Lindsay Walker at walkerl7@cardiff.ac.uk.

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